



May 22, 2000

Green power nearing takeoff in Japan

Source: Kyodo News Service/Associated Press

Publication date: 2000-05-19

TOKYO, May 20 (Kyodo) -- By: Maya Kaneko Movements to promote green energy such as wind and solar power are gaining momentum in Japan against the background of mounting antinuclear sentiment following last year's Tokaimura accident and pressure to cut greenhouse gases by reducing the use of fossil fuels.

A suprapartisan Diet members' association to promote green, or renewable, energy hopes to submit a bill to boost output of such energy before the end of the current Diet session June 17. Formed last November, the group numbers 256 members, from both houses of the Diet, Japan's parliament.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) convened a 30-member subcommittee of the Advisory Committee for Energy on April 24 for the first time in a decade to work out recommendations for a new national energy policy in about a year.

Under the draft bill drawn up by the legislators' association, renewable energies refer to solar and wind power, waterpower from small-scale projects not utilizing dams, biomass energy from resources such as wood shavings, straw and animal discharges, and other energies which are sustainable and friendly to the environment.

Japan's green energy supply accounted for 1.1% of the total in fiscal 1996, while the government is targeting 3.1% for fiscal 2010, according to MITI's Natural Resources and Energy Agency.

In contrast, the European Union has been actively developing renewable energy sources and aims to raise energy supply through such sources to 12% in 2010.

A system to oblige electric power companies to purchase a fixed amount of power generated from renewable energy is widely considered to be a good way forward. Germany, which legislated such a system in 1991, has become the world's top wind power generator.

The association's draft bill fails to introduce such a system, but it requires electric power companies to submit their purchase plans to the new Economy and Industry Ministry, which will replace MITI next January. The new ministry would have the power to demand changes to the purchasing plans.

The draft also calls for the government to use subsidies to promote the shift to green energy, helping overcome the initial cost handicap with regard to conventional energy sources such as oil.

MITI sources have said the ministry is also planning to force power companies to buy a certain portion of electricity generated by wind or solar power through the issuance of certificates.

The system would involve establishment of a "Green Credit System" under which the government would issue certificates to electricity producers in accordance with the amount of green energy generated. Electricity retail companies would then be obliged to either directly buy a certain amount of such energy or to buy the certificates.

Mizuho Fukushima, a House of Councillors member and a senior member of the suprapartisan Diet group, called the National Parliamentarians' Association for Promoting Renewable Energy, says the group's proposed legislation would have a number of effects.

"Promotion of natural energy, a new industry, would not only offer an alternative power source, but rejuvenate local communities as people can control power generation in their own region," she said, referring to Tomamae in Japan's northernmost main island of Hokkaido, where a windmill capable of generating 20,000 kilowatts has benefited the local economy.

Fukushima, who is from the Social Democratic Party and a lawyer by training, said renewable energy development would decentralize Japan's energy supply system. She said that the large membership of the association could be because some Diet members were hoping to benefit from new interests arising from green power generation in their constituencies.

Kazuo Aichi, a House of Representatives member and head of the lawmakers' association, said the legislators' movement is also aiming to make the decision-making process of the government's energy policy more transparent.

"The bill will require the government to draw up a power supply target through green energies and obtain approval for it at the Diet, making discussions on the entire outlook of the nation's energy policy inevitable," Aichi said in an interview with Kyodo News.

He added that ultimately it would be desirable for parliament to decide energy policy goals and what contributions the various sources of energy should make to the total.

Aichi, of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), said the bill may not be submitted to the Diet before June 17, due to opposition from a group of LDP members pushing for a bill to facilitate construction of nuclear power plants by increasing government subsidies.

"Even if the bill is submitted, it is likely to die because the lower house will be dissolved for an election. However, the bill will be introduced to future Diet sessions once it is presented," he said.

Tetsunari Iida, chief researcher at the Japan Research Institute and head of the Green Energy Law Network, a civic group promoting renewable energy, also believes green energy movements are unlikely to lose momentum.

Iida, one of three members on the MITI panel representing civic groups, included for the first time, said he feels rapid changes in the energy policy climate in Japan have begun to affect "hierarchical and inflexible" decision-making processes among bureaucrats and electric power company officials.

He gave as an example International Trade and Industry Minister Takashi Fukaya's announcement in March that the government would cut the number of nuclear power plants to be built by fiscal 2010. The government will give up building 16 to 20 plants and lower the figure to 13, due to public concerns over nuclear safety and sluggish energy demand.

Major companies are quick to cash in on the new trend.

Tomen Corp., a trading firm that has been engaged in the wind power business since 1987 and produces 10% of the worldwide output of wind power, completed the Tomamae facility in northern Hokkaido last fall and is planning to construct another large-scale windmill with a maximum output of 33,000 kw on the Shimokita Peninsula in Aomori Prefecture by the end of 2001.

Marubeni Corp., another major trading firm, plans to build about 20 power-generating windmills in Kagoshima Prefecture with a combined maximum output of 26,000 kw. It hopes to get the system operational in

February 2002 and to sell the electricity output to Kyushu Electric Power Co., company officials said.

Even Tokyo Electric Power Co., a major promoter of nuclear power, which considers renewable energy a "supplementary" power source, is contemplating setting up a joint venture around this fall that would sell electricity generated from wind and solar power in collaboration with Sony Corp., company officials said.

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